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Geographies of Ignorance

As my son turned sixteen, I realized something odd. Travelling with his mother or me, he had visited four continents, cities from Jakarta to Los Angeles, Nairobi to Moscow, but he had never been to Lucca, Pisa or Florence. He was acquainted with distant places, but those nearby were unknown, foreign to him. However, as I thought it over, it came to me that this situation was paradoxical only by the standard of the past, and represented the new normality of the present and still more the future. Once 'faraway lands' were swathed in the fascination of the exotic, no less so if they were crossed by the trails of our own ancestors, like Bruce Chatwin's Patagonia. The farther away they were, the more wrapped in the mists of the unknown, the more they were to be 'explored'. The paradigm of our consciousness of the world was, so to say, concentric. We knew all about what lay around us and what we had contact with. Then, as the distance increased, we would become 'disoriented', ever more completely 'foreigners'. But the communications revolution, both material (low-cost airlines) and immaterial (radio, TV, cellphones, the internet) has meant that 'faraway lands' no longer exist. There is nowhere on the planet that cannot be reached in thirty hours' flying or observed from the sky in real time on Google Earth. The faraway is now close at hand, in sight or in range.

However, this revolution has had an unintended consequence: as the faraway has been brought closer, what was nearby has become distant. This distancing of the contiguous comes about in part because of the finite nature of human life and its span of years. The more we chat by network with remote interlocutors, the less time we have to talk to our neighbours. The more we splash about in the waters off Sharm El Sheik or Puerto Rico or the Maldives, the less we find out about Calabria's Ionian coast: this is one reason why Italians from the North are so ignorant of the South.

The distance between places is now calculated not so much in kilometres as in the level of expense and inconvenience involved in travel from one to another. In this perspective, New York is nearer to Milan than a Sicilian city like Trapani. The effect of this geographical abridgement is also one of social estrangement: it is easier to communicate with an interlocutor who, though far away, is compatible with us in culture, income and status, than with a neighbour from a different social class. (It is for this reason that many no longer pursue discussion or interact

with those who think differently, as on the internet, where groups tend to form around shared ideas and opinions, confirming one another in their own beliefs—and fixations.) The end result of all this spatial disturbance is that our experience of the world is no longer concentric but maculate, like a leopard's skin. We have a good knowledge of far-off atolls and bits of reality near at hand, all surrounded by a sea of nescience. The same city in which we were born and grew up now reveals entire neighbourhoods that are stranger, more exotic than a faraway metropolis. As with my son and Florence or Pisa, it happened to me, on the outskirts of Rome, that I came across a wholly Chinese district I'd been completely unaware of and wouldn't be able to find again.

In his fine study, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century,* Wolfgang Schivelbusch reflects on the difference between 'landscape' and 'panorama'. He associates the concept of panorama with train travel because, as viewed from the small window, the foreground ran past so quickly it had to be omitted from the scene. The panorama is a landscape whose foreground, the part closest to the viewer, has been cut away. Today, for us, the entire world is viewed in panorama. We are now blind to what moves in the foreground, right in front of us, and we cannot reconstruct the landscape. Exoticism is born just around the corner or at our feet; to discover it there is no need to embark on a long flight. Instead, we need to cultivate an explorer's sensitivity to everything that surrounds us, and which we filter out, like so much background noise. Lévi-Strauss would no longer need to go to Amazonia, nor Malinowski to Melanesia: they would be fascinated by the *banlieue* of Sarcelles, just north of Paris, or the hinterland of London's orbital M25.

Comparing the two centuries, we see another map of ignorance that differentiates the twentieth from the twenty-first. I think back on the journeys my generation made, hitchhiking through Kurdistan, Iran and Afghanistan to Nepal, or the friends who bought a second-hand Peugeot in Marseille and sold it in Abidjan, travelling from the Mediterranean to Equatorial Africa. The difference between then and now is that, a half-century ago, those journeys were adventurous, but only up to a point. Today, no one would dream of repeating them, because the world has become so much more dangerous: not only the consciousness of war but also the actual state of belligerency, whether pursued on official or guerrilla terms, appears like those leopard's spots. Who would set out now as a tourist in Somalia?

Globalization has abolished many borders. Perhaps the one mythic country that remains today is not the Amazonian jungle or the highlands of Papua New Guinea but Kim Jong-un's North Korea, a place so shrouded in mystery as to leave us free to weave whatever fantasies we like about it. But many borders have been closed again, rendered impassable by asymmetrical guerrilla warfare. Even such sacred sites of world tourism as Paris, Barcelona or Istanbul have seen visitor numbers slump in the wake of

bloody attacks. Better to wait and see. Who would risk going to Palmyra today? The same goes for exploring our inner cities. In the US, it has long been known that the first thing to ask is which parts of the city are *safe*. Once, before leaving home, we would check the weather to see how to dress. Today, before setting out on a journey, we check the course of wars and local gang feuds—or the incidence of rape. And so what had been brought near recedes into the distance again.

First published as 'Ormai l'esotico è a due passi da casa', *Il Venerdì*, 22 September 2017. Republished with kind permission.